Bill's Sealtest Dairy, Fairbury, IL

Written by William "Bill" Piercy (1914-2010)

When the war ended in Europe, we went back to the farm to work for the Fawn Dawn Dairy Farm. In the fall of 1946, my aunt Beulah Davis's brother, Glen Harris, who had a dairy at Colfax, Illinois, was having trouble with quality control of milk he received from farms. He asked me to come down (from Wisconsin) to work for him and see if I could locate and remedy his problem. We were able to find and remedy the problem at the farm.

However, his health was failing and he was also having cash flow problems, so he sold the dairy to a man from Chicago, who came down with much talk, big plans. It turned out he was a small-time hood, hoping to take over the gambling machine interest in Bloomington and McLean County.

When the police clamped down on the rackets in the area, he folded and ran back to the big city, leaving us without a business and owing farmers for milk. Since he had designated me as foreman, I hung onto the keys and bluffed him into paying some of the help.

After that experience, I was in no mood to work for someone else, so I went to Peoria and arranged to go into business as a dealer for what was then the J. D. Roszell company, an affiliate of Sealtest. I had never been to Fairbury. I came over, drove all over town to evaluate prospects. We had sold our car, cashed in Victory bonds, raised some $1300 to start our business. I had purchased an old Chevy panel truck.

I came back to Fairbury with a few products in an ice chest, started down the street asking people to start buying milk from me. Within four weeks I had stopped at every house in town. I

had some seventy customers, but that first day I sold a pound of butter, one quart of milk, and one carton of cottage cheese and had four customers.

All Roszell distributors operated ice cream dairy stores along with milk delivery routes. I managed to get a room in an old building (on South Second Street by the railroad tracks) that had been a Chrysler dealership before the war. After much work preparing the place, building a walk-in-cooler for milk storage, we opened the store first of July 1947. The store went well. We sold up to six hundred gallons of ice cream per month in the summer, all hand dipped into pints and quarts.

With two children, we had great difficulty with housing. We stored furniture, got one sleeping room for the four of us. We ate at the dairy store where we served sandwiches to the public. Marcella ran the dairy store while I ran the milk route, then drove to Bloomington to pick up merchandise for the next day. We worked through Murray's Dairy the first two years until we got someone to bring the milk directly from Peoria.

I had a very hard job breaking into the wholesale trade (stores, restaurants, etc.). The Meadow Gold Dairy had a very good route man on the Fairbury route, who had taken care of them through the difficult war years. Then Meadow Gold made a very large mistake. They pulled the driver off, put him on a smaller route out in another area. Within a week we had almost every account in town. There were eight small stores in town; none of them sold much of a volume. There were four restaurants and the hospital.

When Brian was born on June 22, 1948, Frank Cox, the hospital manager, decided I should have the hospital account. We kept Sealtest milk there until we sold the business in November 1974.

By today's standards, we had a rather primitive operation to begin with, no grade A, no health inspection. We used regular panel trucks and ice with canvas over to keep our product cool.

In February of 1948 my cousin, Howard Davis, came in with us. We bought a second truck and began moving out into the neighboring towns (Chenoa, Strawn, Lexington, Towanda, Chatsworth, Forrest, Pontiac), eventually operating three trucks. Also in 1948, Marcella's mother May Belle Gilbert became interested in operating a dairy store. I found a building in Chenoa, set up a store, and she came out from Washington, D.C. where she had been living. We opened the store the end of May. She ran the store as "Mom's Dairy Bar" until 1955 when she suffered a stroke.

In 1950 Dave Steffan and his wife came to town and started a grocery store. We got our products in. The first week we sold him about $50 of milk, but he began to take off and by 1959 he was using around $800 per week. About this time the dairy began packaging ice cream in quarts and half gallons, putting it in grocery stores, which pretty much killed the dairy store with their prices. So in the spring of 1951 we closed the dairy store, moved the milk cooler onto a cement slab in back of our house. By 1955 our business had increased so we had to build a larger cooler and use three trucks.

In 1959 we took a blow to our business that almost did us in when the Certified Grocery stores suddenly came out with their own brand name milk and took our products out. Within a month,

we lost half of our business. It took us almost two years to build back. We sold our business November 1, 1974, following the steep rise in fuel prices.